

Preface:

## On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs

In the spring of 2013, I unwittingly set off a very minor international sensation.

It all began when I was asked to write an essay for a new radical magazine called *Strike!* The editor asked if I had anything provocative that no one else would be likely to publish. I usually have one or two essay ideas like that stewing around, so I drafted one up and presented him with a brief piece entitled “On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs.”

The essay was based on a hunch. Everyone is familiar with those sort of jobs that don't seem, to the outsider, to really do much of anything: HR consultants, communications coordinators, PR researchers, financial strategists, corporate lawyers, or the sort of people (very familiar in academic contexts) who spend their time staffing committees that discuss the problem of unnecessary committees. The list was seemingly endless. What, I wondered, if these jobs really *are* useless, and those who hold them are aware of it? Certainly you meet people now and then who seem to feel their jobs are pointless and unnecessary. Could there be anything more demoralizing than having to wake up in the morning five out of seven days of one's adult life to perform a task that one secretly believed did not need to be performed—that was simply a waste of time or resources, or that even made the world worse? Would this not be a terrible psychic

wound running across our society? Yet if so, it was one that no one ever seemed to talk about. There were plenty of surveys over whether people were happy at work. There were none, as far as I knew, about whether or not they felt their jobs had any good reason to exist.

This possibility that our society is riddled with useless jobs that no one wants to talk about did not seem inherently implausible. The subject of work is riddled with taboos. Even the fact that most people don't like their jobs and would relish an excuse not to go to work is considered something that can't really be admitted on TV—certainly not on the TV news, even if it might occasionally be alluded to in documentaries and stand-up comedy. I had experienced these taboos myself: I had once acted as the media liaison for an activist group that, rumor had it, was planning a civil disobedience campaign to shut down the Washington, DC, transport system as part of a protest against a global economic summit. In the days leading up to it, you could hardly go anywhere looking like an anarchist without some cheerful civil servant walking up to you and asking whether it was really true he or she wouldn't have to go to work on Monday. Yet at the same time, TV crews managed dutifully to interview city employees—and I wouldn't be surprised if some of them were the *same* city employees—commenting on how terribly tragic it would be if they wouldn't be able to get to work, since they knew that's what it would take to get them on TV. No one seems to feel free to say what they really feel about such matters—at least in public.

It was plausible, but I didn't really know. In a way, I wrote the piece as a kind of experiment. I was interested to see what sort of response it would elicit.

This is what I wrote for the August 2013 issue:

### **On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs**

In the year 1930, John Maynard Keynes predicted that, by century's end, technology would have advanced sufficiently that countries like Great Britain or the United States would have achieved a fifteen-hour work week. There's every reason to believe he was right. In technolog-

ical terms, we are quite capable of this. And yet it didn't happen. Instead, technology has been marshaled, if anything, to figure out ways to make us all work more. In order to achieve this, jobs have had to be created that are, effectively, pointless. Huge swathes of people, in Europe and North America in particular, spend their entire working lives performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed. The moral and spiritual damage that comes from this situation is profound. It is a scar across our collective soul. Yet virtually no one talks about it.

Why did Keynes's promised utopia—still being eagerly awaited in the sixties—never materialize? The standard line today is that he didn't figure in the massive increase in consumerism. Given the choice between less hours and more toys and pleasures, we've collectively chosen the latter. This presents a nice morality tale, but even a moment's reflection shows it can't really be true. Yes, we have witnessed the creation of an endless variety of new jobs and industries since the twenties, but very few have anything to do with the production and distribution of sushi, iPhones, or fancy sneakers.

So what are these new jobs, precisely? A recent report comparing employment in the US between 1910 and 2000 gives us a clear picture (and I note, one pretty much exactly echoed in the UK). Over the course of the last century, the number of workers employed as domestic servants, in industry, and in the farm sector has collapsed dramatically. At the same time, "professional, managerial, clerical, sales, and service workers" tripled, growing "from one-quarter to three-quarters of total employment." In other words, productive jobs have, just as predicted, been largely automated away. (Even if you count industrial workers globally, including the toiling masses in India and China, such workers are still not nearly so large a percentage of the world population as they used to be.)

But rather than allowing a massive reduction of working hours to free the world's population to pursue their own projects, pleasures, visions, and ideas, we have seen the ballooning not even so much of the "service" sector as of the administrative sector, up to and includ-

ing the creation of whole new industries like financial services or tele-marketing, or the unprecedented expansion of sectors like corporate law, academic and health administration, human resources, and public relations. And these numbers do not even reflect all those people whose job is to provide administrative, technical, or security support for these industries, or, for that matter, the whole host of ancillary industries (dog washers, all-night pizza deliverymen) that only exist because everyone else is spending so much of their time working in all the other ones.

These are what I propose to call “bullshit jobs.”

It’s as if someone were out there making up pointless jobs just for the sake of keeping us all working. And here, precisely, lies the mystery. In capitalism, this is precisely what is *not* supposed to happen. Sure, in the old inefficient Socialist states like the Soviet Union, where employment was considered both a right and a sacred duty, the system made up as many jobs as it had to. (This is why in Soviet department stores it took three clerks to sell a piece of meat.) But, of course, this is the very sort of problem market competition is supposed to fix. According to economic theory, at least, the last thing a profit-seeking firm is going to do is shell out money to workers they don’t really need to employ. Still, somehow, it happens.

While corporations may engage in ruthless downsizing, the layoffs and speed-ups invariably fall on that class of people who are actually making, moving, fixing, and maintaining things. Through some strange alchemy no one can quite explain, the number of salaried paper pushers ultimately seems to expand, and more and more employees find themselves—not unlike Soviet workers, actually—working forty- or even fifty-hour weeks on paper but effectively working fifteen hours just as Keynes predicted, since the rest of their time is spent organizing or attending motivational seminars, updating their Facebook profiles, or downloading TV box sets.

The answer clearly isn’t economic: it’s moral and political. The ruling class has figured out that a happy and productive population with free time on their hands is a mortal danger. (Think of what started to

happen when this even began to be approximated in the sixties.) And, on the other hand, the feeling that work is a moral value in itself, and that anyone not willing to submit themselves to some kind of intense work discipline for most of their waking hours deserves nothing, is extraordinarily convenient for them.

Once, when contemplating the apparently endless growth of administrative responsibilities in British academic departments, I came up with one possible vision of hell. Hell is a collection of individuals who are spending the bulk of their time working on a task they don’t like and are not especially good at. Say they were hired because they were excellent cabinetmakers, and then discover they are expected to spend a great deal of their time frying fish. Nor does the task really need to be done—at least, there’s only a very limited number of fish that need to be fried. Yet somehow they all become so obsessed with resentment at the thought that some of their coworkers might be spending more time making cabinets and not doing their fair share of the fish-frying responsibilities that before long, there’s endless piles of useless, badly cooked fish piling up all over the workshop, and it’s all that anyone really does.

I think this is actually a pretty accurate description of the moral dynamics of our own economy.

Now, I realize any such argument is going to run into immediate objections: “Who are you to say what jobs are really ‘necessary’? What’s ‘necessary,’ anyway? You’re an anthropology professor—what’s the ‘need’ for that?” (And, indeed, a lot of tabloid readers would take the existence of my job as the very definition of wasteful social expenditure.) And on one level, this is obviously true. There can be no objective measure of social value.

I would not presume to tell someone who is convinced they are making a meaningful contribution to the world that, really, they are not. But what about those people who are themselves convinced their jobs are meaningless? Not long ago, I got back in touch with a school friend whom I hadn’t seen since I was fifteen. I was amazed to discover that in the interim, he had become first a poet, then the front man in

an indie rock band. I'd heard some of his songs on the radio, having no idea the singer was someone I actually knew. He was obviously brilliant, innovative, and his work had unquestionably brightened and improved the lives of people all over the world. Yet, after a couple of unsuccessful albums, he'd lost his contract, and, plagued with debts and a newborn daughter, ended up, as he put it, "taking the default choice of so many directionless folk: law school." Now he's a corporate lawyer working in a prominent New York firm. He was the first to admit that his job was utterly meaningless, contributed nothing to the world, and, in his own estimation, should not really exist.

There's a lot of questions one could ask here, starting with, What does it say about our society that it seems to generate an extremely limited demand for talented poet-musicians but an apparently infinite demand for specialists in corporate law? (Answer: If 1 percent of the population controls most of the disposable wealth, what we call "the market" reflects what *they* think is useful or important, not anybody else.) But even more, it shows that most people in pointless jobs are ultimately aware of it. In fact, I'm not sure I've ever met a corporate lawyer who didn't think their job was bullshit. The same goes for almost all the new industries outlined above. There is a whole class of salaried professionals that, should you meet them at parties and admit that you do something that might be considered interesting (an anthropologist, for example), will want to avoid even discussing their line of work entirely. Give them a few drinks, and they will launch into tirades about how pointless and stupid their job really is.

This is a profound psychological violence here. How can one even begin to speak of dignity in labor when one secretly feels one's job should not exist? How can it not create a sense of deep rage and resentment? Yet it is the peculiar genius of our society that its rulers have figured out a way, as in the case of the fish fryers, to ensure that rage is directed precisely against those who actually do get to do meaningful work. For instance: in our society, there seems to be a general rule that, the more obviously one's work benefits other people, the less one is likely to be paid for it. Again, an objective measure is hard to find, but

one easy way to get a sense is to ask: What would happen were this entire class of people to simply disappear? Say what you like about nurses, garbage collectors, or mechanics, it's obvious that were they to vanish in a puff of smoke, the results would be immediate and catastrophic. A world without teachers or dockworkers would soon be in trouble, and even one without science-fiction writers or ska musicians would clearly be a lesser place. It's not entirely clear how humanity would suffer were all private equity CEOs, lobbyists, PR researchers, actuaries, telemarketers, bailiffs, or legal consultants to similarly vanish.<sup>1</sup> (Many suspect it might improve markedly.) Yet apart from a handful of well-touted exceptions (doctors), the rule holds surprisingly well.

Even more perverse, there seems to be a broad sense that this is the way things should be. This is one of the secret strengths of right-wing populism. You can see it when tabloids whip up resentment against tube workers for paralyzing London during contract disputes: the very fact that tube workers can paralyze London shows that their work is actually necessary, but this seems to be precisely what annoys people. It's even clearer in the United States, where Republicans have had remarkable success mobilizing resentment against schoolteachers and autoworkers (and not, significantly, against the school administrators or auto industry executives who actually cause the problems) for their supposedly bloated wages and benefits. It's as if they are being told "But you get to teach children! Or make cars! You get to have real jobs! And on top of that, you have the nerve to also expect middle-class pensions and health care?"

If someone had designed a work regime perfectly suited to maintaining the power of finance capital, it's hard to see how he or she could have done a better job. Real, productive workers are relentlessly squeezed and exploited. The remainder are divided between a terrorized stratum of the universally reviled unemployed and a larger stratum who are basically paid to do nothing, in positions designed to make them identify with the perspectives and sensibilities of the ruling class (managers, administrators, etc.)—and particularly its financial avatars—but, at the same time, foster a simmering resentment

against anyone whose work has clear and undeniable social value. Clearly, the system was never consciously designed. It emerged from almost a century of trial and error. But it is the only explanation for why, despite our technological capacities, we are not all working three- to four-hour days.

If ever an essay's hypothesis was confirmed by its reception, this was it. "On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs" produced an explosion.

The irony was that the two weeks after the piece came out were the same two weeks that my partner and I had decided to spend with a basket of books, and each other, in a cabin in rural Quebec. We'd made a point of finding a location with no wireless. This left me in the awkward position of having to observe the results only on my mobile phone. The essay went viral almost immediately. Within weeks, it had been translated into at least a dozen languages, including German, Norwegian, Swedish, French, Czech, Romanian, Russian, Turkish, Latvian, Polish, Greek, Estonian, Catalan, and Korean, and was reprinted in newspapers from Switzerland to Australia. The original *Strike!* page received more than a million hits and crashed repeatedly from too much traffic. Blogs sprouted. Comments sections filled up with confessions from white-collar professionals; people wrote me asking for guidance or to tell me I had inspired them to quit their jobs to find something more meaningful. Here is one enthusiastic response (I've collected hundreds) from the comments section of Australia's *Canberra Times*:

Wow! Nail on the head! I am a corporate lawyer (tax litigator, to be specific). I contribute nothing to this world and am utterly miserable all of the time. I don't like it when people have the nerve to say "Why do it, then?" because it is so clearly not that simple. It so happens to be the only way right now for me to contribute to the 1 percent in such a significant way so as to reward me with a house in Sydney to raise my future kids . . . Thanks to technology, we are probably as productive in two days as we previously were in five. But thanks to greed and some busy-bee syndrome of productivity, we are still asked to slave away

for the profit of others ahead of our own nonremunerated ambitions. Whether you believe in intelligent design or evolution, humans were not made to work—so to me, this is all just greed propped up by inflated prices of necessities.<sup>3</sup>

At one point, I got a message from one anonymous fan who said that he was part of an impromptu group circulating the piece within the financial services community; he'd received five emails containing the essay just that day (certainly one sign that many in financial services don't have much to do). None of this answered the question of how many people really felt that way about their jobs—as opposed to, say, passing on the piece as a way to drop subtle hints to others—but before long, statistical evidence did indeed surface.

On January 5, 2015, a little more than a year after the article came out, on the first Monday of the new year—that is, the day most Londoners were returning to work from their winter holidays—someone took several hundred ads in London Underground cars and replaced them with a series of guerrilla posters consisting of quotes from the original essay. These were the ones they chose:

- Huge swathes of people spend their days performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed.
- It's as if someone were out there making up pointless jobs for the sake of keeping us all working.
- The moral and spiritual damage that comes from this situation is profound. It is a scar across our collective soul. Yet virtually no one talks about it.
- How can one even begin to speak of dignity in labor when one secretly feels one's job should not exist?

The response to the poster campaign was another spate of discussion in the media (I appeared briefly on *Russia Today*), as a result of which the polling agency YouGov took it upon itself to test the hypothesis and conducted a poll of Britons using language taken directly from the essay: for

example, Does your job “make a meaningful contribution to the world”? Astonishingly, more than a third—37 percent—said they believed that it did not (whereas 50 percent said it did, and 13 percent were uncertain).

This was almost twice what I had anticipated—I’d imagined the percentage of bullshit jobs was probably around 20 percent. What’s more, a later poll in Holland came up with almost exactly the same results: in fact, a little higher, as 40 percent of Dutch workers reported that their jobs had no good reason to exist.

So not only has the hypothesis been confirmed by public reaction, it has now been overwhelmingly confirmed by statistical research.

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Clearly, then, we have an important social phenomenon that has received almost no systematic attention.<sup>3</sup> Simply opening up a way to talk about it became, for many, cathartic. It was obvious that a larger exploration was in order.

What I want to do here is a bit more systematic than the original essay. The 2013 piece was for a magazine about revolutionary politics, and it emphasized the political implications of the problem. In fact, the essay was just one of a series of arguments I was developing at the time that the neoliberal (“free market”) ideology that had dominated the world since the days of Thatcher and Reagan was really the opposite of what it claimed to be; it was really a political project dressed up as an economic one.

I had come to this conclusion because it seemed to be the only way to explain how those in power actually behaved. While neoliberal rhetoric was always all about unleashing the magic of the marketplace and placing economic efficiency over all other values, the overall effect of free market policies has been that rates of economic growth have slowed pretty much everywhere except India and China; scientific and technological advance has stagnated; and in most wealthy countries, the younger generations can, for the first time in centuries, expect to lead less prosperous lives than their parents did. Yet on observing these effects, proponents of market ideology always reply with calls for even stronger doses of the same

medicine, and politicians duly enact them. This struck me as odd. If a private company hired a consultant to come up with a business plan, and it resulted in a sharp decline in profits, that consultant would be fired. At the very least, he’d be asked to come up with a different plan. With free market reforms, this never seemed to happen. The more they failed, the more they were enacted. The only logical conclusion was that economic imperatives weren’t really driving the project.

What was? It seemed to me the answer had to lie in the mind-set of the political class. Almost all of those making the key decisions had attended college in the 1960s, when campuses were at the very epicenter of political ferment, and they felt strongly that such things must never happen again. As a result, while they might have been concerned with declining economic indicators, they were also quite delighted to note that the combination of globalization, gutting the power of unions, and creating an insecure and overworked workforce—along with aggressively paying lip service to sixties calls to hedonistic personal liberation (what came to be known as “lifestyle liberalism, fiscal conservatism”)—had the effect of simultaneously shifting more and more wealth and power to the wealthy and almost completely destroying the basis for organized challenges to their power. It might not have worked very well economically, but politically it worked like a dream. If nothing else, they had little incentive to abandon such policies. All I did in the essay was to pursue this insight; whenever you find someone doing something in the name of economic efficiency that seems completely economically irrational (like, say, paying people good money to do nothing all day), one had best start by asking, as the ancient Romans did, “*Cui bono?*”—“Who benefits?”—and how.

This is less a conspiracy theory approach than it is an *anticonspiracy* theory. I was asking why action *wasn’t* taken. Economic trends happen for all sorts of reasons, but if they cause problems for the rich and powerful, those rich and powerful people will pressure institutions to step in and do something about the matter. This is why after the financial crisis of 2008–09, large investment banks were bailed out but ordinary mortgage holders weren’t. The proliferation of bullshit jobs, as we’ll see, happened

for a variety of reasons. The real question I was asking is why no one intervened (“conspired,” if you like) to do something about the matter.

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In this book I want to do considerably more than that.

I believe that the phenomenon of bullshit employment can provide us with a window on much deeper social problems. We need to ask ourselves, not just how did such a large proportion of our workforce find themselves laboring at tasks that they themselves consider pointless, but also why do so many people believe this state of affairs to be normal, inevitable—even desirable? More oddly still, why, despite the fact that they hold these opinions in the abstract, and even believe that it is entirely appropriate that those who labor at pointless jobs should be paid more and receive more honor and recognition than those who do something they consider to be useful, do they nonetheless find themselves depressed and miserable if they themselves end up in positions where they are being paid to do nothing, or nothing that they feel benefits others in any way? There is clearly a jumble of contradictory ideas and impulses at play here. One thing I want to do in this book is begin to sort them out. This will mean asking practical questions such as: How do bullshit jobs actually happen? It will also mean asking deep historical questions, like, When and how did we come to believe that creativity was supposed to be painful, or, how did we ever come up with the notion that it would be possible to sell one’s time? And finally, it will mean asking fundamental questions about human nature.

Writing this book also serves a political purpose.

I would like this book to be an arrow aimed at the heart of our civilization. There is something very wrong with what we have made ourselves. We have become a civilization based on work—not even “productive work” but work as an end and meaning in itself. We have come to believe that men and women who do not work harder than they wish at jobs they do not particularly enjoy are bad people unworthy of love, care, or assistance from their communities. It is as if we have collectively acquiesced to our own enslavement. The main political reaction to our awareness that

half the time we are engaged in utterly meaningless or even counterproductive activities—usually under the orders of a person we dislike—is to rankle with resentment over the fact there might be others out there who are not in the same trap. As a result, hatred, resentment, and suspicion have become the glue that holds society together. This is a disastrous state of affairs. I wish it to end.

If this book can in any way contribute to that end, it will have been worth writing.